

Should I be concerned about my child's imaginary friend?

It's not unusual for imaginary friends to emerge in the lives of young children, especially toddlers. Often times they are human, but can take many magical forms. Sometimes, these playmates visit occasionally while others are constant companions. Imaginary friends allow children to stretch their imagination and be creative. They can act as a trusted confidant and provide your child with a sense of security. Imaginary friends also provide parents with some insight to their child's developmental level and the feelings that they may not be expressing outwardly. Children often blame mistakes in judgment on their imaginary friends demonstrating to parents that they know the difference between right and wrong.

Parents are encouraged to *play along* with their child's imaginary playmate; greeting them when they enter the room with their child or reserving a spot at the dinner table for them. However, imaginary friends should not suffice as your child's only playmate. Children need to socialize with others their own age to promote healthy development and social skills. Don't allow your child to shift all responsibility onto their imaginary playmate as children need to learn that there are consequences for their actions.

Most children discard their imaginary friends between the ages of three and five. Sometimes they are forgotten while others move away or befriend a new child. Parents are recommended to consult their pediatrician in the event that their child has an imaginary friend that begins to interfere with their everyday routine or stays for an extended period of time.